

# Creating An Ideal Workplace Culture: The Keys to Unlocking People Talent

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper examines four key concepts – a description of what constitutes a positive workplace culture, an outline of what employee engagement includes, a framework that outlines the importance of a “spirit of trust” in creating a positive workplace culture, and a view of how core organizational values can be used to drive efforts to create an ideal library culture.

**Design / Methodology / Approach:** This paper provides references to key research results from Harris Interactive and the Great Place to Work Institute, presents the results of an academic library application, draws on the work of noted authors and provides practical techniques gained from the authors’ experiences.

**Findings:** Library leaders who want to establish an ideal workplace culture need to focus on activities that generate and demonstrate trust. A strong set of core values, which all employees respect and practice, help to build the organizational trust account. This creates the environment for employee engagement to thrive.

**Practical Implications:** This paper outlines practical frameworks as well as specific techniques that leaders can use to make key contributions towards establishing and sustaining a strong, positive workplace culture.

**Originality / Value:** The authors’ practical experiences in applying a values audit and many of these techniques within a library setting demonstrate the usefulness of these tools and concepts for library leaders.

## Introduction

The concepts of workplace culture and employee engagement are inextricably linked together. Today’s modern workplace where four different generations work together, with different perceptions of work ethics, these two concepts may look like “The Holy Grail” of effective people management practices.

## Workplace Culture Defined

The culture of any organization, including that of a library, represents “the way we do things around here” and “the way we treat one another around here”. Every organization has a very distinctive culture – whether it is officially acknowledged or not. Your culture permeates every part of your operation. It is like the air that your employees breathe every moment that they are at work. Library

leaders need to ensure that it is healthy air that enables people to grow and develop while producing key results.

These two images convey the almost invisible, yet critically important nature of your library culture.



“Water? What water?”



“Culture? What culture?”

The nature of your culture contributes to employees’ perceptions about their own individual possibility of influencing or impacting what occurs within the workplace. In a positive, motivating environment, employees feel free to give their best effort because they believe that it will yield constructive results. In a negative, debilitating environment, employees are very guarded and cautious about what they would like to do because of the sense of fear and anxiety that exists, robbing the library of their potential contribution.

What produces these two significantly different scenarios? Trust. Respect. The level of trust that employees feel exists within the organization dictates how they respond. This includes the demonstrations of trust that occur up and down the organizational hierarchy, across the various library units or between individuals within teams. In addition, the level of respect that is exhibited for what each individual stands for, what he or she contributes as well as what each could be capable of contributing are critical components of your library’s workplace culture.

In every library there are stories that demonstrate the nature of your culture. These include examples of how people responded when the organization was facing stressful situations (e.g. a budget cut), or how managers responded when individuals were facing their own stressful situations (e.g. a personal or work crisis). They also describe incidents when the library needed something extra from employees – or – when employees needed something extra from the organization and how each request was handled.

There are many great examples of organizations that have been transformed and produced amazing organizational success by intentionally improving their workplace culture. One of the most dramatic examples was the one conducted from 1988 – 1992 at Centennial Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee, one of the largest medical complexes in the USA. (Arnold and Plas, 1993) Through the introduction of an innovative approach called “person-centered leadership” this organization shifted from the brink of bankruptcy to enabling the parent company (Hospital Corporation of America) to become the largest for-profit health care organization in the USA, over a four-year period.

By relentlessly applying a set of five People Principles and five Credibility Principles that were labeled “hard-nosed humanism” they rebuilt their workplace

culture. Every single employee, regardless of title and position, came to understand and value the significance and the importance of their role and their individual contribution. Bureaucratic structures, policies and practices were eliminated and replaced with pragmatic, conscientious dialogue among colleagues that fostered accountability and creativity. In their new culture, every employee was treated with dignity and respect, which seems so simple, yet is often not the norm.

Although this situation occurred more than twenty years ago, it seems strange to see so many of today's articles, books and blogs presenting the impression that making one's workplace an inviting and caring environment is the latest trend or fad in leadership and management. These ideas and techniques have been advocated and practiced by hundreds of enlightened leaders for decades. But what is really needed is to have this approach practiced by thousands of leaders, if we truly expect to unlock and release the full power and potential of people in organizations. For many, this approach may be considered very radical and probably somewhat dubious by today's standards of management practice. Why is this so? Because we may be so steeped in the "traditional way of doing things" that it is extremely difficult to consider creative options. Yet at the same time, we want and hope for dramatic changes in the calibre of our workplace culture. Change does not occur because we wish for better results. Better initiatives and better approaches produce better results.

This example has application for any library too. The nature of your library workplace is what nurtures employee commitment and employee engagement. The level of employee engagement is what determines your library's success.

## **Employee Engagement – The Key to Organizational Success**

- Employee engagement is a topic that is receiving significant attention. Researchers love to study its effects. Leaders and managers seek it within their teams. Authors write endlessly about its impact on organizations.

Even a cursory examination of the literature on this topic yields a variety of descriptions, such as:

- "An 'engaged employee' is one who is fully involved in, and enthusiastic about, his or her work, and thus will act in a way that furthers their organization's interests." [1]
- "Engagement is a two-way street – an open flow of communications relaying the specific needs of the employee and the organization."  
(Tapscott, Don, 2009)

Hewitt Associates, a consulting firm that assesses levels of employee engagement by asking employees to rate their employers, develops an annual list of the 50 Best Employers in Canada. They say this about engagement:

- "To measure engagement, we look at these elements: **say**, **stay** and **strive**. Employees are engaged when they:
  - speak positively about the organization to co-workers, potential employees and customers,
  - have an intense desire to be a member of the organization, and

- exert extra effort and are dedicated to doing the very best job possible to contribute to the organization's business success." [2]

In each of these descriptions there is a clear emphasis that engagement is a double-sided coin – focusing on the needs and expectations of employees, while also attending to the organization's needs and expectations.

Despite the significant emphasis and exposure on this topic, an extensive study of 23,000 US employees conducted by Harris Interactive provided statistical results that painted a rather dismal picture of the level of employee engagement that they found. (Covey, 2004) Among other findings, their study indicated that:

- Only 37% said they have a clear understanding of what their organization is trying to achieve and why.
- Only 1 in 5 employees said they have a clear "line of sight" between their tasks and their team's and organization's goals.
- Only 1 in 5 was enthusiastic about their team's and organization's goals.
- Only half were satisfied with the work they have accomplished at the end of the week.
- Only 15% felt that their organization fully enables them to execute key goals.
- Only 15% felt they worked in a high-trust environment.

Covey goes on to report that these dismal findings reflect his own experience, based on his work with clients of all types throughout the world. He finds that employees are often unclear and confused about what is expected of them by their organization. They are often frustrated, bogged down and distracted by conflicting and confusing messages from leaders and managers. This produces an attitude of resignation and despondency. Employees feel that they cannot influence positive improvements because too many leaders pay little attention to the views, suggestions and ideas coming from the front-line employee level. This produces a huge waste of talent, energy, commitment and passion. Covey poses a key question to all leaders: "Can you imagine the personal and organizational cost of failing to fully engage the passion, talent and intelligence of the workforce? It is far greater than all taxes, interest charges, and labour costs put together!" There is quite a contrast between this study and the results achieved by the Centennial Medical Center back in the early 1990's. It's hard to consider this as progress, isn't it?

That is a serious indictment of leadership failure in our view. It appears clear that if leaders can make even small gains in improvement on the results cited above, there are huge benefits to be realized. There is an old maxim in the field of leadership development that says: "People don't care about how much you know – until they know how much you care." This is a powerful message!

However, it's not the leader who holds the key that unlocks employee engagement. During a television interview more than twenty-five years ago, Roger D'Aprix, a highly respected Organization Development consultant from New York City outlined a very simple and intriguing perspective on the subject of employee motivation. He felt that employees seek clear answers to a series of six simple questions:

The "I" Questions:

- What's my job?

- How am I doing?
- Does anybody really care?

If they receive satisfactory answers to these questions, they are then ready to ask:

The “We” Questions:

- How are we doing?
- Are we doing our share?
- What can I do to help?

D’Aprix explained that he believed that the last question was the real key to employee motivation – and it was clear that it was the employee who held the key to unlock the enthusiasm, energy and commitment needed to make a major contribution to organizational success.

So, if an employee holds the key to motivation, what does the leader or manager hold? They hold the responsibility to do whatever they can to create the type of workplace environment or workplace culture where the first five questions can be answered in an honest, candid way, to engage employees. That’s right, it’s the leader and manager who is in a position to bring about dramatic improvements in the engagement of their people. If leaders don’t do what they can to ensure that there is a positive, healthy and constructive workplace culture, it is unrealistic to expect employees to be engaged.

Library leaders can help to ensure that the six questions noted above can be answered quickly and accurately.

### **1) *What’s my job?***

You must ensure that each employee has a clear, accurate outline of what their work or role entails and what she or he is expected to accomplish in their job. This can be in the form of a “personal mission statement”, rather than a detailed formal job description, which is based solely upon the related technical job classification system. It should include a simple outline of the primary duties, the key working relationships with others and a clear outline of what you, as the library leader, expect in terms of performance results.

### **2) *How am I doing?***

Library leaders must provide regular feedback on the performance of each employee through an effective performance feedback system that identifies areas of strength, areas where improvement is needed, and ensures that individuals will be supported as they work to learn ways to improve their contribution and produce better results. Younger employees, accustomed to instant performance feedback through their engagement with video games and on-line game technology, expect frequent and regular feedback. They are not satisfied with an annual performance review discussion. That’s too far removed from the behaviours and activities they want feedback on. They want – and need – brief, instantaneous feedback on a day-to-day basis, in addition to the more formal annual or semi-annual review process.

### **3) *Does anybody really care?***

Library leaders need to be able to provide the regular feedback noted above and also provide a level of rewards and recognition appropriate to the situation.

This requires a good understanding of which motivators work best for the various individuals that you lead – and that you have access to a variety of recognition options that can be provided when it is appropriate to do so. Not all recognition initiatives require a financial expenditure. For many people, a simple, sincere “Thank You” comment or gesture, given at the right time can be very meaningful and very important. This is all about truly demonstrating how much you value the contributions of your people.

**4) *How are we doing?***

Effective leaders must be able to outline what their particular group or team contributes to the overall direction of the library and the achievement of its mission. If team members have no idea of where they stand in terms of the overall results, they are unable to determine what specific changes are needed to contribute to success. People can be more focused when they have access to the “real score of the game” and be able to assess their contribution towards that achievement. This is about contribution – not competition.

**5) *Are we doing our share?***

If team members can see that they are doing their fair share and that progress is occurring, that provides them with the positive feedback that keeps them engaged. On the other hand, if they can see that their contribution is not meeting expectations and that others are being compromised by their own group’s inability to meet their own goals, it can help to ignite the desire to bring about positive changes. Honesty and candor are essential at this point – let them truly know how they are doing, so they can figure out what else might be needed. Accurate, up-to-date information is necessary to fulfill this leadership role.

**6) *What can I do to help?***

This is the magical point where employees are ready to “turn their internal key”, ready to continue, escalate or expand their efforts, to ensure that everything is “on track”. This is the moment of motivation, or the moment of true engagement.

So, the library leader’s primary role is to help to create, establish and nourish the type of library culture where employees are eager to ask these six questions and ready to contribute their knowledge, skills, and abilities to help achieve success. This entails developing the culture that fits the expectations of your workforce. In turn, this means that you need to truly understand what employees are looking for in their “ideal library workplace”. Surprisingly, the answer is not that complicated, but some leaders may find it difficult to provide.

## **Applying the Lessons of Engagement in an Academic Library**

The University Library at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S Library), in Saskatoon, Canada has concentrated on ways to raise the level of library employee engagement since 2006. They developed their first Library

Strategic Plan in 2006-07 and that plan has a significant component of people initiatives. They continue to review, update and improve this plan annually to ensure that it is always current and relevant. The U of S Library has undertaken an employee survey at regular intervals since 2006 and this has allowed them to track employee engagement over time. Over roughly the same time frame, the university also undertook a different but related employee survey and the U of S Library was able to extract library-specific data from those surveys, to complement the data from the in-house library employee survey.

The work at the U of S Library relies on research work undertaken by Gallup, a human resources consulting firm. This particular survey asks respondents to rate their level of agreement against twelve statements (The Gallup 12) to gauge the degree of employee engagement:

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment to do my work right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinion seems to count.
8. Our organization's mission makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year I have had opportunities to learn and grow.

From their survey data the U of S Library learned a number of things about the level of employee engagement, including the following:

- In 2005, approximately 5 out of 10 library employees considered themselves as engaged.
- That score increased in 2006.
- That score increased again in 2008.
- The whole university engagement score in 2008 was less than that of the library.

Gallup data indicates that "excellent employers" normally have engagement scores in the seventieth percentile range and "top employers" have scores in the top seventieth or eightieth percentile range.

In relation to the Gallup 12 questions the U of S Library learned that:

- The library's lowest scores were "recognition" and "someone talked to me about my progress".
- The library's two highest scores were "I know what is expected of me at work" and "Someone cares about me at work".
- Responses to "Someone talked to me about my progress" increased from 2005 to 2008 and responses to having the "opportunity to do my best every day" also increased.

Armed with these results and a strong commitment to continue to improve the level of employee engagement, the U of S Library leadership supported and resourced its employees to develop a Library People Plan, which was completed in late 2009. The process chosen was the Haines Centre for Strategic Management's methodology, which is described in detail in the authors' recently published book on this topic. (McKinlay and Williamson, 2010).

In the case of the U of S Library, Gallup's research shows that focusing on developing people's strengths helps to build engagement while focusing on their weaknesses decreases engagement. Hewitt research shows that once an organization does the basics well (such as pay, benefits, policy, flexibility) then leaders leading and managers managing are the two key elements to improve engagement. This includes things like: giving clear direction, treating others with respect, demonstrating values, keeping promises, helping clarify expectations, giving feedback, dealing with poor performers, and fixing processes or procedures that don't work.

The work from the U of S Library example demonstrates that concerted efforts have a positive impact on the level of employee engagement – and it is a continuous process of improvement.

## **Trust is the Core Ingredient for Employee Engagement**

Since 1998, Partners within the Haines Centre for Strategic Management have been refining and delivering a workshop built around "The Systems Thinking Approach to Strategic People Planning" (Bandt and McKinlay, 2003). At the outset of this program, a set of six emerging trends affecting the field of human resource management into the future, as well as a set of seven key human resource challenges facing organizations are presented. One of these challenges is entitled "Creating Organizations and Responsive Work Environments that Generate High Employee Commitment and Engagement". This methodology has been used to provide support to libraries in several different countries, enabling them to improve engagement.

A deeper discussion of this specific challenge is presented (McKinlay and Williamson, 2010), with reference to the work of the Great Place to Work Institute. The Institute's annual surveys are conducted with more than 1.5 million employees, in more than 3,600 organizations, in forty different countries. [3] The 2009 survey results clearly indicated that the loyalty and commitment managers seek from their employees really boils down to just one complicated, five-letter word: TRUST.

They have developed a "Trust Wheel" model identifying five specific dimensions and several characteristics:

### ***Credibility:***

- Being approachable and easy to talk with, answering hard questions, and making expectations clear
- Trusting people without looking over their shoulders
- Being reliable, delivering on promises and "walking the talk"
- Articulating a clear vision for the company or department



***Respect:***

- Showing appreciation for employees' efforts and contributions
- Ensuring that people have the equipment they need to do their jobs
- Seeking employees' opinions and involving them in important decisions
- Caring for employees as people with lives outside of work

***Fairness:***

- Ensuring all employees have opportunities for rewards and recognition
- Avoiding playing favorites, especially when promoting people
- Treating all employees fairly, regardless of age, race or sex
- Ensuring employees are paid fairly

***Pride:***

- Helping employees feel they personally make a difference in their work
- Inspiring employees to feel pride in team accomplishments
- Helping employees feel proud of the whole company and its contributions to the community

***Camaraderie:***

- Creating a workplace atmosphere where employees can be themselves and care about each other
- Welcoming new employees to a friendly environment and celebrating special events
- Creating a cooperative work environment and demonstrating that people are "all in this together"

The characteristics under the categories of Credibility, Respect and Fairness are combined to determine the "trust index" within an organization. These are based upon the employees' opinions of the workplace and these three areas account for two-thirds of the overall assessment score. Many of these same characteristics are evident within the results of the U of S Library case study cited previously. The categories of Pride and Camaraderie make up the "cultural audit index", based on management's policies and practices, which account for the remaining one-third of the overall assessment score.

Based on their results for the past several years, organizations that make their "best places to work" list invariably have a very high score on the trust index. Responsive organizations and responsive work environments that generate employee engagement are those that demonstrate many of the eighteen characteristics listed above. These are the ingredients that employees look for – and as a result are prepared to work for – in their workplace. We believe that this straightforward approach is applicable to library workplaces.

Library leaders who are competent at establishing this type of workplace culture will always be recognized as "employers of choice". These are the libraries that people are clamoring to join, where there is a deep, strong culture of engagement with a reasonably low level of employee turnover. Since recruitment and retention are key topics of concern for libraries, creating a culture built upon trust and outstanding management policies and practices will invariably yield superior results.

Reinforcing the significance of the trust factor, President Obama's campaign manager reports (Plouffe, 2009) that: "We stated from the outset we would try to build a collegial team, where everyone was in it for something bigger than him – or herself. We would not staff positions with merely the best talent available ... when (a campaign's) internal dynamic is corrosive and not filled with trust, it can be unbearable. <sup>[4]</sup> Apparently this approach worked for them. That means it can work for others too, including libraries.

It appears to us that there are two fundamental schools of thought about the issue of trust. In one case, you are given all of a person's trust. If this trust is respected and honoured, things work very well. If you do something that breaks this trust, then the level of trust is diminished and you must work to re-earn it. In the second approach, you begin with a zero trust level and you work diligently to earn one's trust, over time, based upon your collective efforts and results that prove you are trustworthy. The first approach reflects the culture outlined in the Great Place to Work Institute survey results. The second approach creates a culture of mistrust and cautious behaviour, which does not contribute to a positive workplace culture. Now, let's look at how your "library trust account" can be built up through regular deposits – or depleted because of regular withdrawals.

## **Role of Core Values in Building Trust**

Core values are the building blocks to creating trust. We have found that this applies on an individual level as well as on a team or organizational level. One's personal values guide and drive their behaviour. In seeking employment, individuals tend to use their own personal values as a filter to examine the organizational culture, trying to discern the corporate values of any new potential employer.

Much has been written about the importance of values. Some of the initial authors who wrote about applying the concept of values within an organizational setting examined this subject as it applied within the field of education. They felt that the issue of "values clarification" was a teachable skill (Kirschenbaum, 1977). This traces the early records of the discussion of values, values clarification and values conflict back to the mid 1960's. Today, the discussion about values and their impact on organizational success are found in the works of noted writers such as Kouzes and Posner, Collins and Porras, Wheatley, Ulrich and Smallwood, and Hampden-Turner.

Over the past few years, the topic of organizational values has been reported regularly in news media accounts and on websites worldwide – primarily as examples of leaders who have flagrantly violated their own "principles of behaviour". The most blatant example was provided by the Enron Corporation scandal. Kenneth Lay, former Chairman, and Jeffrey Skilling, former CEO, were both convicted in 2006 of engaging in fraudulent practices and security violations. This is but one example of many cases where organizations, having spent time developing a set of corporate value statements that employees were expected to follow and honour, failed to hold

their most senior executives accountable to the same set of guiding principles. Ironically, Enron had frequently appeared on the lists of “best companies to work for” in the USA during the 1990’s (Roach, 2006). Organizations do not normally make this type of list if there isn’t something of value within the organization. So where did things go so wrong?

Core value statements are guides to individual behaviour. They serve as a filter for decision-making to ensure that individuals don’t make unethical, illegal or immoral decisions that contravene an organization’s guiding principles. Most libraries have such statements. The fact that library leaders establish values for internal use means that they are the only ones who can monitor their own practices. If there is no desire or expectation that people are expected to “walk the talk” as the phrase goes, then don’t waste the time, energy and cost to develop a set of platitudes that no one is expected to respect. “Walk the talk” means we will deliver on our verbal promises to operate within the guidelines of our values. This does not mean that we are expected to do it only when others are watching. It means that each of us will do it – all of the time! These are not “convenient statements”, which are framed to hang at the entrance to the library. When this happens, we refer to these as “poetry on the wall”. They look good, but don’t expect anyone to follow them.

Library leaders need to ensure that a unique set of core values are created that can be used to guide and fuel your desired organizational culture. Once these have been developed, through consultation with employees, to ensure that they agree with the principles of behaviour that they are expected to live by, then the task of “living the values” – or “walking the talk” – begins in earnest. One client once provided a classic example of the antithesis of this concept, when he stated: “Walk the talk ... right! Around here we have a tendency to ‘stumble the mumble’ rather than ‘walk the talk’.”

One very effective technique for assessing an organization’s capabilities at living their values is to conduct a values audit. This method was initially developed during an earlier phase of the author’s consulting career, as the Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Public Service Commission, in Canada. The U of S Library has also applied the values audit technique to obtain employee feedback.

It’s a simple concept that can have powerful results. This survey of your employees asks them to provide answers to three questions, for each of your core values. These questions are:

1. How well do you understand this value?
2. How well do you believe we are living this value?
3. Can you provide some real life examples to support your answer to # 2?

The design enables respondents to check off the score that best represents their views for the first two questions. The richness of this technique is contained in the answers to the third question, which invites written, reflective comments. This is valuable information that can provide the insight leaders need to acknowledge efforts to live the values or to refocus energy and attention to working harder to entrench the desired behaviours.

We have seen cases where leaders discovered that:

- the value statements needed to be re-written in clearer language to achieve common understanding,
- opinions about how well employees are living the values are varied, often depending on one's level or position within the organization,
- there are many excellent examples of people living the values that go unnoticed, and
- there were examples of clear violations of the values that went unchallenged.

In all of these cases, the dialogue generated in analyzing and responding to the findings proved extremely valuable. It demonstrated transparency and contributed to employees' engagement.

We have also seen a few cases where leaders refused to examine the results, because they were fearful of what employees would say, or because they felt that too few people responded, invalidating the results. In these cases, cynicism grew and employees began to emotionally distance themselves from their leaders. Trust was broken and morale spiraled downwards. This process requires unwavering commitment from leaders to follow through on the results, regardless of the answers provided. Be prepared to repeat this process annually for several years. Behavioural change related to core values is a cultural change initiative. Our research and our client work prove that true cultural change is a 3-5 year exercise. Don't expect immediate results.

Research shows a pattern where *visionary organizations that live their values* clearly outperform other similar organizations by a wide margin. (Collins and Porras, 1994) Their results have been replicated and further validated many times by others.

Establishing a set of core values for your library is not an academic exercise on a "to do list". The process you choose to follow needs to be well designed and well executed. This task works best when carried out by a cross-sectional group representing every department of your library and various staff levels within your library. It is paramount that all members of the executive team are included – this is a leadership role that cannot be delegated to others and it is one where abdication of one's leadership responsibility cannot be tolerated. As you develop the draft set of values, share these with employees to seek their input. A final set of core values is then produced, building upon the feedback received. Continue to highlight your new values for several years until they begin to gain traction and become embedded within your culture. Conducting a regular values audit demonstrates that you really do care about what people think about the values. By acting on the rich supply of information provided, you demonstrate the importance of these values in building your ideal organizational culture.

## **Conclusion:**

Values are the foundation of successful organizations and the future success of your library is essentially linked to your organizational values. They are critical components for building trust in your library. Trust is one of the principle qualities that employees need to see, before they commit themselves

to be fully engaged in pursuit of the library's vision and mission. These components – values, trust and engagement – are the building blocks of an ideal organizational culture. Library leaders play a critical role in putting these building blocks in place so that their library can be successful, especially in turbulent times. When you work to create the right type of workplace culture, employees will be ready to pick up their engagement key, insert it within your organization and do their best to contribute what they have to give. Library leaders cannot ask for or expect anything more from their people.

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